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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a system of methods for teaching Afro-American Literature at the secondary and college level. Seven goals of the methodology are presented for the course, including making the students familiar with various definitions of black literature, helping the students use the tools of literary analysis in the discussion of black literature, and teaching the students about several major figures in Afro-American literature--their background and their major works and themes. Methods to achieve these goals include reading, discussing the readings in small groups, writing brief plot summaries, writing abstracts of articles relevant to black literature, keeping a journal of personal responses, and viewing films and filmstrips. Various methods of evaluating and comparing Afro-American literature are also suggested, including a discussion of the works of Richard Wright and Imamu Amiri Baraka. (TS)

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A METHODOLOGY FOR TEACHING AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Jean Kittrell
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Methodology = a system of methods; here, specifically, a system of methods to teach Afro-American literature. That is a grandiose title, implying, perhaps, more system than is found in this paper. Here are set forth some specific goals in the teaching of Afro-American literature and some specific activities to achieve those goals. The underlying philosophy shaping these suggestions is the belief that in the study of literature a student learns more by doing than by listening, learns more by asking and answering questions than by taking notes on a lecture, learns more by analyzing the imagery in a poem imperfectly than by listening to a brilliant analysis by an instructor. Thus, classroom techniques which require student initiative are set forth here. What is not provided are modes of literary analysis, since it is presumed that every teacher of literature has already acquired an approach to plot structure, characterization, settings, imagery, irony, humor, theme, as a foundation to the study and teaching of literature.

An emphasis on student activity replaced about six years ago my former emphasis on lectures. I stopped lecturing in World Literature, in the Drama Survey, in the Short Story in America, in the Survey of English Literature from 1832 to the Present, because there was no excitement, no sense of exploration among the students. I wanted them to enjoy literature as I did, so I got out of their way, quit telling them what was there, began to listen, let them tell me and each other their discoveries. Thus, the techniques set forth here evolved before I began to teach Afro-American literature. How fortunate--because as a white teacher of Afro-American literature in a class predominantly black, I have simply continued the professional stance I had already assumed--the stance of a learner, a seeker after knowledge looking for fellow seekers. Socrates says the wise man is he who knows he does not know. There is so much I do not know about the black experience in America, but my students are teaching me--and themselves!

The goals of the methodology presented here for teaching Afro-American literature are that by the end of a ten weeks course in Afro-American literature, a student

1. will be familiar with various definitions of black literature, and will determine his or her own definition;
2. will acquire the habit of discussing black literature with peers independently of the instructor's guidance;
3. will use tools of literary analysis in the discussion;
4. will know several major figures of past and present in Afro-American literature, something of their background, some of their major works and themes;
5. will know how to find out more about black writers;
6. will be aware of several ways to evaluate black literature and will determine his or her criteria of evaluation;
7. will have enjoyed reading black literature and will anticipate reading more.

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Methods to achieve these goals include the following student activities: (1) reading;[1] (2) discussing the readings in small students groups without the participation of the instructor; (3) discussing questions initiated by students or instructor in class; (4) writing brief plot summaries; (5) analyzing, orally or in writing, characters, settings, use of imagery, irony, themes; (6) illustrating all general statements or conclusions about a literary work with specific examples; (7) browsing through black literary periodicals to discover articles relevant to the course; (8) writing abstracts of these articles; (9) viewing films and film strips and listening to cassettes and records relevant to black literature; (10) memorizing poems; (11) considering differing viewpoints of black literature and its evaluation; (12) determining one's own position toward black literature and its evaluation; (13) Keeping a journal of personal responses to the literature such as comments about what a student liked or didn't like about a work and why, observations about relevance of the literature to the aspects of the student's life or to human experience in general, and examples of the student's own writing--shott stories, poems, or memoirs triggered by the reading; (14) performing teacher - specified behavioral objectives which reveal the student's mastery of the materials in the course.

The instructor directs these student activities in large part by setting the stage, then getting out of the way. The instructor may initially provide information about the terms used in naming the people brought from Africa to the New World. Their kidnappers described them as "negro" or "neger" (adapted from the French "negre" and the Spanish "negro" meaning "black") or disparagingly, as "nigger." By the twentieth century blacks called themselves "colored people." Thus, the interracial organization formed in 1909 with W.E.B. DuBois on its board of directors was called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In the 1920's "Negro" with a capital N was the term, and Marcus Garvey appealed to nearly a million black Americans with his Universal Negro Improvement Association. Within the last decade blacks have begun to reject the term "Negro", Rap Brown equating "Negro" with "Uncle Tom" and nigger, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) calling "Knee-grows" only "imitation white boys." Now blacks name themselves "black" or "Black" to express pride in their color and "Afro-American" to claim both their African and American heritage.[2]

The instructor may also introduce students to contrasting views of what black literature is. For Richard Wright[3] Negro

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[1]On the advantages of student-chosen readings as a part of the study of literature, see Bruce C. Appleby, "individualized Reading as Environment for the Literary Experience," in The Creative Teacher, ed. William Evans (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971), pp. 1-10.

[2]In discussing a writer's ideas I use the same terms to designate blacks which he employs.

[3]"The Literature of the Negro in the United States," in Richard Wright, White Man Listen! (new York: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 69-105.

literature means a literature of protest against a hostile environment. Wright distinguishes sharply between "American literature," created by writers at one with their environment, and "Negro American literature," created by blacks ostracized from their society's dominant culture. Only one black writer, Phyllis Wheatley, has written American literature, according to Wright. All other blacks have written Negro American literature. By contrast blacks integrated into the culture of their country have written literature in the traditions of that country. In France the Negro Alexander Dumas wrote French literature. The Russian Negro Alexander Pushkin wrote Russian literature. Neither wrote Negro literature. Both were integrated into their societies. And Wright theorizes that if "the Negro merges into the main stream of American life, there might result actually a disappearance of Negro literature as such" (p. 104) in the United States, but he also warns that continued injustice will continue racial themes and protest literature.

Imamu Amiri Baraka[4] has denied the existence of a valid black literature in America prior to the mid-1960's. He considered literature by blacks up until that time to be mainly a mediocre imitation by middle-class Negroes of white culture and a denial of their blackness. He accused black writers of inability to propose their own symbols or erect their own personal myths. In the decade from 1965 up until the summer or fall of 1974 Baraka worked to create through his poetry, plays, and essays new and genuine black literature, a literature by blacks about blacks for blacks, and a black aesthetics by which to define and judge that literature.[5]

Ever innovative and developing, since mid-1974 Baraka has again redefined literature and its purpose. Transcending the color line of black aesthetics and skin nationalism, he now requires art to speak to the potential quality of every human life, to serve all oppressed people of any race and color. Art must make a social commentary. Baraka rejects art for art's sake, or art for any one culture's sake. Baraka's latest definition of literature, although similar to Wright's definition of Negro American literature as protest literature, is an international definition of art as a pragmatic skill which must serve oppressed people within the framework of scientific socialism as espoused by Marx, Lenin, and Mao-Tse-tung.[6]

Darwin T. Turner[7] has the most far-reaching view of what Afro-American literature is: it embraces protest writers, writers influenced by Anglo-European writers, black aestheticians, indeed "all literature produced by Afro-American writers or by black writers of other countries who have become identified with the U.S." (p. 11). The only necessary element of Afro-American literature for Turner is that the writers "have shared the experience of living as black men in America" (p. 12).

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[4]LeRoi Jones, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" an address given at the American Society for African Culture, March 14, 1962, reprinted in Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), pp. 190-197.

[5]For the standards of the new black aesthetics see page 6 and Note 13 below.

[6]For his latest views see Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Some Questions About the Sixth Pan-African Congress," The Black Scholar, 6 No. 2 (October 1974), 45-46; and an interview of Baraka by Michael Putney, "Have-Nots in Revolt," in The National Observer, 15 March 1975, pp. 1, 14.

[7]Darwin T. Turner and Barbara Dodds Stanford, Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Literature by Afro-Americans (Urbana, IL: NCTE Educational Resources Information Center, 1971), pp. 3-46.

The definitions of black literature set forth by Wright, Baraka, and Turner, while they challenge the student to apply them to the course readings, are only starting points for student activities. Definitions of literature cannot be adequately considered apart from the characteristics and intentions of particular literary works, as will be discussed below in the methods of evaluation of literature written by blacks.

Two classroom techniques which stimulate student activities are small group discussions and self-paced, personalized instruction. Small group discussions[8] without the participation of the instructor are one of the most effective and enjoyable (perhaps there is a correlation between the two characteristics) learning methods I know. The instructor abandons the lecture method, diminishing his or her visibility and volubility, and allows the student to come face to face with a literary work and the opinions of classmates without intercession or interference. In a student group of four to six the student does the thinking--selecting what to discuss, summarizing, analyzing, criticizing, praising, comparing the literature, instead of listening to and regurgitating the opinions of the instructor. The student submits opinions for criticism, approval, rejection, or refinement by classmates. And the student in turn evaluates classmates' ideas. Through active participation the student acquires the skills of literary analysis.

There is an additional facet to these small group discussions. Usually there are about two-thirds black students and one-third white students in my class in Afro-American literature, all having elected to take the course since it is not required. They appear uniformly disappointed when a white instructor enters the room. I am quick to inform them that I do not pose as an expert on the black experience. I come to the literature as a learner, and I have already learned a lot. I expect to learn more. But neither do I apologize for my presence as a white teacher in the Afro-American literature classroom, because much of this literature was written by blacks with a white audience in mind. My proposition to the class is that if the black students will share with the whites their black responses to the literature, which otherwise the whites could never know, and if the whites will share their white responses to the literature with the blacks, then there can occur a broadening of vision for us all. All students are urged to know and address each other by name. The ensuing frank interchange of ideas among students in the classroom which has occurred throughout the last two years has been most gratifying.

What is the role of the teacher in a class proceeding in small group discussions without him or her? It is the instructor who determines what writers will be studied in the course,[9] who provides introductory materials, and, if necessary, a provocative question or two to get discussion started. But this is backstage supportive work. In class the teacher becomes an eavesdropper, not a lecturer! Without obtruding upon the small group discussions, the teacher notes any important ideas not covered by the students and discusses these with the entire class near the end of the class period. The instructor also acts as a resource person, available to any student group when questions of meaning or of pertinent background information arise. The instructor occasionally provides models of literary analysis--comments on imagery, figurative language, irony, plot structure, discussions of characterization or theme. And very occasionally the teacher may indulge in a lecture to share with the class an admiration for a particular technique, style, Weltanschauung.

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[8]See Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, Practical Approaches to Individualizing Instruction: Contracts and Other Effective Teaching Strategies (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing Co., Inc., 1972).

[9]The essays by Turner and Wright cited above give excellent surveys of Afro-American writers.

The instructor can also encourage rigorous thinking in small group discussions by emphasizing the related roles of generalization and specification.[10] A general statement about a literary work should be explained with specific examples. The movement from the abstract to the particular exposes vague generalizations, clarifies meanings, and offers the student a means of developing ideas. On the other hand, a mass of details can be organized and focused by a generalization. The movement from the particular to the abstract develops the skills of comparison and contrast and encourages creative thinking.

Another method of learning based on active student participation is the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI).[11] This method, based on the mastery theory of learning, self-pacing, and the use of student proctors, divides course work into several units, then allows a student to take unit tests as he or she is ready. If the student fails a test, the student may, after completing additional prescribed study, take a second or third test until the material is mastered. Student proctors, who have already completed the unit work, either in a prior class or earlier in the same course, grade and discuss each unit test with the student as soon as the work is completed, supplying the personalized element of the system. This method retains the peer interaction of small group discussions and adds the rigorous demands of mastery and the satisfactions of self-pacing.

Even more important than the specific content of a course in Afro-American literature to the student is the knowledge of how to find out more about black writers. The student particularly needs to become familiar with what black critics say about black writers. To encourage the student to browse, the instructor may distribute a list of black periodicals,[12] asking the student to find in any listed journal an article relevant to any work studied in the course, to zerox the article, write a précis of it, and hand in article and précis together. The instructor need not grade the précis, but if it omits important ideas, the student should rewrite it to provide a clear summary of the author's ideas. Annotated lists of suggested readings, anthologies, and collections of criticism can continue to guide the student's reading when a course is over.

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[10] A discussion, dealing with the movement from the abstract to the concrete and back, which has greatly influenced my approach to literature and composition, is found in "How We Know What We Know" by Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa in Language in Thought and Action, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1972).

[11] Science, Feb. 1, 1974, pp. 379-383, carries an excellent review by J. K. Kulik, C. L. Kulik and K. Carmichael of the evaluative literature on PSI. Also see J. Gilmour Sherman, Personalized System of Instruction: Forty-one Germinal Papers (Menlo Park, CA: W. A. Benjamin, Inc., 1974); F. S. Keller, "Goodbye, Teacher--," Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, Vol. 1 (1968), pp. 79-89; Fred S. Keller and J. Gilmour Sherman, The Keller Plan Handbook (Menlo Park, CA: W. A. Benjamin, Inc., 1974).

[12] Some of the most interesting black periodicals are Black Scholar, Black World (formerly Negro Digest), Black Theatre (edited by Ed Bullins), CLA Journal (Morgan State College), Freedomways, Negro American Literature Forum for School and University Teachers, Phylon (Atlanta University), and Studies in Black Literature (Mary Washington College).

As a student becomes familiar with black literature, the student naturally begins to make evaluative judgments of it. He or she is encouraged not to make evaluations such as: "this writer's plot, characters, imagery, theme, are better than that writer's." Comparisons and contrasts of writers can be stimulating and enlightening, but they are not good evaluative tools. Instead the student may be encouraged to consider the work in and of itself--its essence. How does the writer use the elements of fiction to create a unique statement? Can the writer's purpose in this work be determined? Has the writer stated the purpose elsewhere? If so, how effectively does the author achieve that purpose? Does the work reflect a unified world view? Do settings, mood, imagery, reinforce character development, reveal theme? In this approach a black author will not be criticized for dealing with universal themes instead of writing protest literature, will not be reprimanded for following in English or European literary traditions instead of striking out new forms. This approach does not set sharply delineated limits on style, form, or content. The writer is judged simply by what is attempted and what accomplished.

A different mode of evaluation may also be introduced to the student: the new "black aesthetics" first inspired by Amiri Baraka and enunciated by him, Ed Bullins, Don L. Lee, and others.[13] This black aesthetics demands a rejection of the Anglo-European and American literary traditions, language, critics, and culture values. It offers new criteria, formulated by blacks, to evaluate the literature now being written by blacks for black-only audiences. This black aesthetics demands the use of "black language"--"black" idioms, grammar, syntax, the language of the inner-city streets. It seeks to instill ethnic pride in black culture, to create new symbols and myths, new forms, to stress communalism, to appeal to the masses of black people. It stresses feelings, not reason. It hopes to inspire social, political, and economic change. It does not believe whites can understand black art or black critics. The black aesthetics sets guidelines for its writers and evaluates them by its standards. It asks: how well does this work express uniquely black feelings and ideas in a uniquely black form?

Still another way to judge the worth of literature written by blacks is to consider, as Baraka's scientific socialistic aesthetics does, how much the literature "contributes to the greatest good for the masses of people. That has to be the overriding philosophy. . . . Art has to serve the people." Literature is good which raises the consciousness of the masses, enlightens people as to the potential quality of their daily lives, and leads eventually toward a pluralistic society where everybody has the democratic right of self-determination. The student-critic, once made aware of these various yardsticks of literary quality, may then make an educated judgment of a work's literary worth.

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[13]For discussions of the new black aesthetics see Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1972); the introductory essay and afterword in Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, eds. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1968); "Interview with Ed Bullins" by Marvin X in New Plays from the Black Theatre, ed. Ed Bullins (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1969); Editor's Preface to The New Black Poetry, ed. Clarence Major (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1969); Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., Black Expression; Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., The Black Aesthetic (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971); Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1973).

When the student knows what he or she is expected to do at the end of a course because the instructor has given out clearly specified behavioral objectives, the grade-conscious worrier as well as the quick and easy achiever may relax and enjoy the literature. Even the seemingly indifferent low achiever may be stimulated to work if there is a clearly realizable goal. The dread of the unknown is removed!

Behavioral objectives to signify accomplishment of the goals listed at the beginning of this paper might include:

1. the student will write three definitions of black literature as given by Richard Wright, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Darwin T. Turner;
2. the student will give and defend his own definition of black literature;
3. the student will write a 400-word essay showing how characterization, plot, and setting reveal theme in Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth," using specific examples to illustrate each point made.

Many more objectives would be listed in an actual course. If the PSI format is used, behavioral objectives are stated for each of the several units of the course.

Another strategy to encourage a pleasant classroom experience is the specificity of a contract agreement between student and instructor, wherein the work to be done and the grade to be received are specified.[14]

If the uncertainty about requirements of the course and about grades is removed so that the reader can respond directly to the literature, if class discussions prove stimulating, if the student acquires a broader view of human experience from the sensitivity and wisdom of the writer's vision, then the student is likely to read more black literature in the future. Not many people are reluctant to repeat enjoyable and self-fulfilling experiences.

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[14]See Dunn and Dunn.